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Patrick J. Leahy and William S. Cohen

A Counterintelligence Policy

After years of complacency, the executive branch and Congress are trying to bring the threat of Soviet espionage under tighter control. The White House and Congress are both now intensively reviewing U.S. counterintelligence and security capabilities.

Many counterintelligence improvements will be directed more at ensuring the reliability of Americans with access to secrets than at making life more difficult for Soviet KGB officers posing as diplomats. Yet the spy problem leads back to the horde of hostile intelligence agents operating out of foreign embassies, consulates, U.N. missions, "trade" organizations and "press" offices. A counterintelligence policy with teeth must include a cutback in foreign intelligence agents here, as well as needed improvements in U.S. personnel and information security practices.

To begin restricting the hostile intelligence presence, we drafted a bill aimed at eliminating the long-standing advantage the Soviets enjoy in the level of their diplomatic and consular officials in the United States as compared to the number of American officials in Moscow. The Leahy-Cohen bill, which requires numeric equality, was recently signed into law by President Reagan.

With some 320 diplomats and consular officials in the United States (not counting their bloated presence at the United Nations in New York), the Soviets overwhelm the FBI by sheer numbers. Between 30 and 40 percent of Soviet officials in the United States are thought to be professional intelligence officers. Evading surveillance, they travel around freely, meet whomever they please and carry on their work of trying to blackmail or pay Americans to become traitors.

By contrast, the United States has fewer than 200 officials in the Soviet Union. Our personnel live under the constant eye of the KGB, are sprinkled with "spy dust" and irradiated by microwaves, and are subject to innumerable petty harassments that limit their effectiveness as well as comfort.

It was the president's endorsement of the Leahy-Cohen approach in a radio broadcast that finally overcame the resistance of the foreign affairs bureaucracy to effectively combating the problem. The professional establishment regarded what we wanted to do as interference in their "right" to manage U.S. diplomatic relations.

In offering the bill, we pointed out that there are two approaches to attaining parity in diplomatic representation. One way would be to increase the number of Americans serving in Moscow. Because of the miserable conditions, however, there are practical limits on how many could be sent. Alternatively, we

could lower the ceiling on Soviet diplomats allowed in Washington. To be realistic, however, this could lead to a series of expulsions and counterexpulsions of diplomats from the United States, the Soviet Union and even other countries.

We intend and expect that the Soviet edge will be eliminated by a combination of these two avenues. This dual track would simultaneously lessen the two key security problems in this area:

- Replacing some of the more than 200 Soviet nationals employed in our Moscow embassy (many of whom are KGB spies) with Americans would give us more presence in the Soviet Union while reducing the Soviet access to our embassy building.

- A phased drawdown in the total of Soviet diplomatic and consular officials in the United States would ease the surveillance burden on the FBI and other counterintelligence agencies. This could be accomplished by declining to issue visas for full replacement as Soviet officials are transferred; no provocative expulsions would be needed.

There are about 120 more Soviet diplomatic and consular officials in the United States than we have in the Soviet Union. We feel that a reasonable package designed to implement numeric equality would result in at least 50 more Americans in Moscow to replace double that number of Soviets. A 1-for-2 replacement ratio should be about right, since the Americans would be working full-time for the embassy while the Soviets have been spending at least half-time on their "extracurricular duties." This should be accompanied by a phased reduction of about 70 or 80 in the ceiling on Soviet diplomats granted visas to enter the United States.

Regrettably, some in the State Department, the lead agency for implementing Leahy-Cohen, prefer to raise the number of Americans in the Soviet Union somewhat but refuse to cut back the number of Soviets in the United States at all. The State Department opposes our efforts for two reasons. First, it believes it must have Soviet employees in our Moscow embassy to "interface" with the Soviet bureaucracy. Second, it fears the Soviets might retaliate by expelling some American officials.

Should the executive branch decide that it does not want to offend the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow by lowering the ceiling on Soviet diplomats here in the United States to equal the number of Americans there, we will be forced back to the legislative drawing board. Congress is determined to reduce the Soviet espionage threat.

Sen. Leahy (D-Vt.) is vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Sen. Cohen (R-Maine) is a member of the committee.